

Keep Your Eyes Open by zipzipnada

Series: [lost and found \[1\]](#)

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: AND WHEN THEY'RE UNTREATED FOR LITERALLY HOURS, Gen, Head Injury, Jancy implied, Jopper implied, Seizures, author addresses how dangerous head injuries are, especially severe ones like the one steve suffered

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Characters: Dustin Henderson, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Joyce Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Mike Wheeler, Steve Harrington, the gangs all fuckin here, the other characters also appear in parts

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Summary:

After fighting Demogorgons and Demodogs, it felt so hard to believe that the most damage done to Steve was inflicted by a simple, regular old Human being.

[or the one where everyone remembers that head trauma is really, freaking serious and requires urgent treatment]

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

So yeah, I'm sick of shows and movies acting like head injuries that intense are something the characters can just shrug off. I'm NOT a doctor, this is just from some extensive ass googling here.

Warning for seizures, I guess a bit of body horror, bleeding and gore etc. Lots of panicking and general medical nightmares.

They convene back at the Byers house when it's all over, given the place has become the accidental hub of activity in Hawkins over the last year and some, and Steve just about makes it. The moment Dustin helps him through the door, Steve crashes into the wall and groans, leaning his full weight instead on the thin dry wall instead of a well-meaning, yet only small child.

A small child that then poked his side. *Ouch.*

"Steve? Hey Steve, come on you're blocking the way" Dustin says encouragingly, still riding the high of their victory. Almost everyone else has crashed into a somber mood again and through the doubling blur his vision has become, Steve can make out Will and Mrs.Byers settling down on the couch with mother combing her fingers through her son's hair. For some reason that's all he can focus on for a moment.

It's lovely. Joyce's fingers gentling brushing through Will's hair. Calming. Nice. Cozy. Steve tries to think of the last time his mom ever did that for him.

"What the hell?" Another little voice grumbles, and something thumps Steve on the back. It's not Dustin, because in the swirl of colors Steve

can just about make out Dustin in front of him. Steve faintly feels himself slide, and this apparently functions as him moving out of the way, because who he assumes is Mike storms past him and just seems to... disappear into the room.

Okay. Cool. Mike disappeared. *Can kids stop doing that it's very stressful.*

"Alright, okay, someone's a little sleepy. Come on. This way Stevie" He hates the name Stevie. "Sorry. Steve. Come on. The couch is gonna be way better than the wall I promise"

Dustin's so nice. Dustin, in his fuzzy glory, ends up taking one of Steve's hands while someone else takes the other, and Steve expects to start moving but doesn't. Someone tugs on his jacket at the shoulder-

He reels back when a large mass suddenly lurches towards him, knocking his head against the wall. Which hurts but then doesn't hurt, because there are big, soft, warm hands cupping the base of his head and the nape of neck.

" - happened to him?" He catches the tail end of a very manly voice. Oh, Steve thinks. That's Chief Hopper. Oh yeah, he's here, he's a thing. *Nice.*

His hands are warm and nice, and Steve wishes his dad did this more. Why did his mom and dad never do nice stuff like this? Hug him. Eat dinner with him at night. In the back of his mind, Steve wonders what it would be like to get a hug from Chief Hopper.

A little orange creature appears, popping from honestly nowhere. "My step-brother happened-" and says something else for a while, and Steve tries to listen because woh, that sounds like a fun story. He wishes he could listen in but the problem is nothing in the room

matches up anymore. Everything is too bright, too spinning. In the car journey he'd been wired, just like during the fights but now he felt sick.

Woh, okay, wow. He felt super sick.

Some time must have passed without him because Steve blinks and all the people blobs in the room have moved. There's a thin, yet warm, hand on his knee and gently touching his hair, people are urgently saying his name, and Steve winces when they pitch too loud.

Then, like a force hitting his head, a migraine unlike anything Steve's ever felt smashes into his brain.

Mike regrets shoving Steve instantly. After storming by he catches the way his sister's jaw drops at the sight of something behind him, and immediately turns back around.

Instead of grumbling or snapping at him and moving out the way, Steve doesn't so much move as just *drift* with the weak shove and after everything they've been through, it's a new kind of frightening and disturbing watching Steve slide slowly down the wall. Steve's strong, Steve's *awesome*. Steve's suppose to be fine all the time and look out for the rest of them.

Steve's not suppose to go limp like a rag-doll.

It's like all the air leaves the room when the gangly boy reaches the ground without a word, and Dustin and Lucas trip over themselves to drop down next to him.

"Steve? Hey, man, get up. Come on" Lucas encourages, then he turns

a glare on Mike when Steve doesn't immediately complain about the ruckus. "Why'd you do that? He's done nothing but help us-"

A red hot, indignant blush rushes to Mike's cheeks. Guilty and over tired. "He was in the way muttering like a crazy dude, Lucas! I didn't know"

"Mike's disappeared" Steve slurs, and worryingly he's telling the child in question this. Pointing sluggishly at Mike's wide, frightened eyes. "Kids need t'stop that. S'very stressful"

Dustin looks around the room at the adults, who are exchanging looks and not doing anything yet. There's some silent communication going on between them all that Dustin doesn't get. He sighs, grabbing Steve's hand and shaking it in faux jest. "Alright, okay, someone's a little sleepy. Come on. This way Stevie-"

"-hate name Stevie. Dun'like..."

"Sorry. Steve. Come on. The couch is gonna be way better than the wall I promise"

Dustin pulls on Steve's arm, trying a more urgent method to motivate the older boy into moving. Nothing. His eyes have closed. The little boy squeaks out a quiet call for help, but it cracks and dies under the burn of tears that have begun to fill his eyes and thicken his throat. Dustin locks eyes with Max, whose jaw hangs as hovers near the older boy, her hands balled her sleeves into nervous fists and her mind conjuring up the sound of Billy's fist on Steve's face: the smash of ceramic cracking on his temple.

"Steve!" Lucas shouts, which finally snaps the rest of the room to attention. It's a blur of movement then as it settles in that the nightmare of the week isn't over yet: something is seriously wrong

with Steve.

Nancy is ghostly pale, crouching near by and gripping onto Steve's shin as she gently shakes it, Jonathan at her side with wide eyes. "Steve? Come on, wake up Steve. Stop playing around this isn't funny"

Jonathan shakes his head. "I don't think he's playing around, Nancy"

The ground seems to thud as Hopper marches over from Joyce to the cluster of panicking children, parting them like the red sea, calling for everyone to move out the way.

"What happened?" He demands, and Max, looking smaller than anyone's has ever seen her, steps up to offer a quick explanation.

Billy, a bully from school did it. He'd been taunting her friends- Hopper takes a moment to realize she was including Steve in that group- for weeks and he'd always made her life hell too. He'd come over to the house, somehow finding them and had tried to hurt Lucas.

"Aw shit kid" Hopper grumbles, hearing the other children jump in with their own add-ons of Steve fighting Billy off of Lucas, only to have a plate smashed to his head and then...

"Then he just starting punching him. Over and over. He wouldn't stop so-" Lucas' voice cracked, needlessly reminding Hopper these were just *children*. "So Max got the stuff you used to knock Will out and took him down"

Jonathan jumps in with a question Hopper hadn't thought of in the flurry, interrupting his admiration for Max's smart thinking. "How

long ago was this?"

The kids look between themselves, and then Dustin looks at the clock. "About two hours ago?"

Nancy rakes a hand through her hair, letting out a long hiss. "Was Steve awake?"

Good. Good questions. Nancy and Jonathan are some steady kids. Hopper listens, but keeps his focus on Steve, who seems to have trouble really *seeing* the man in front of him let alone understanding what was going on around him.

All three kids shake their heads, and Mike pipes up. "He didn't wake up for ages. It took us about ten minutes to just get him in the car, and then we drove from here to the farm"

Nancy swears again and no one can blame her.

Steve was unconscious, by the kids' count and by journey approximation, for just over half an hour.

That's a long time. That's too long. Any time is too long but that... That's too fucking long.

For a large man, Jim Hopper is beyond gentle as he carefully calls Steve's name, giving the softest smile when the kid's dark eyes blink open sluggishly. As if he's cradling something fragile, precious, Hopper felt around the boy's head and winced when he reached the left temple and found sticky, dark blood mixed with- alarmingly-bright, light red blood too. A few curse words drift from his lips when he dips his thumbs into Steve's ears and they come back wet and dark.

"Hey, hey kid, come on. Stay awake, come on" Hopper murmurs, holding Steve's face as the kid ignores him and drops right unconscious again. He points at Max and Lucas, who're hovering worriedly. "You two get some blankets, Jonathan go get a pillow, Dustin, some water. Nancy get on the phone, call the ambulance right now. Joyce-"

He turns to find her over by the couch, and blinks to find she's already by his side. He hadn't expected her to leave her son, and he glances to see Mike and Eleven standing guard over Will: who's getting some much needed rest, and appears as one calm center piece in the chaos that suddenly erupted. It's sickeningly ironic considering the state of the kid mere hours before, but Hopper can't deny he's pleased and relieved to see the healthy glow to the little boy's cheeks.

A glow that's nowhere to be found on Steve's waxy complexion. Hopper curses under his breath.

Shit. Why does life always have to take it out on children?

"Jim?" Joyce asks, and Hopper realizes he said that out loud.

"Watch him, we may have to drive him ourselves. I'll go get the truck ready" Hopper tells her, nodding once in response to her own flurry of minute nods.

He pauses only briefly, only for one short second, to watch Joyce cradle Steve's limp body and stroke his hair like she had Will. She cared so much for all the children, even one's who were on the edge of being an adult and pretended like they were already there. She was so ready to be anyone's mother. She holds onto Steve, cooing and encouraging him when the kid blinks awake again, and Hopper takes a breath.

The police chief of Hawkins throws open the door and runs out to his car.

He barely makes it to the car when the sounds of kids shrieking slam through the night.

Jonathan crashes back into the room with his bedroom pillow to see his mother cradling Steve, and lets out a rush of air he didn't notice he'd been holding.

Okay. This could be okay.

Nancy is still on the phone, rattling off the Byers' address supplied by Mike because she doesn't know it well enough yet, Hopper's gone out to start his car because whether or not Steve gets taken by them or by the ambulance, at least a third of them are going to want to climb into that big truck and follow right after Steve.

If someone had told him a little over a year ago his heart would be racing at a million miles an hour over gut clenching terror for Steve. Freaking *Steve* Harrington. Jonathan would have never believed them.

Then just as Jonathan turns back around, there's a thud. Then more and more. And he has no idea what it means but it terrifies him. His mom shouts at him. "Jonathan, pillow now!" and he practically throws it at her as Steve starts convulsing.

She gets the pillow between Steve's head and the wall, padding every violent impact his skull makes as his whole body jerks, and the kids are all screaming because it's one thing being taught about what a seizure is and another thing entirely seeing one happen. It's

horrifying, and Jonathan has already seen his brother experience too many, so he doesn't want to see someone else he cares about go through it too. This was suppose to be over. They defeated the Mind Player. Eleven closed the gate. This was suppose to be *over*.

"Jonathan!" Nancy snaps at him, ushering the kids away. Lucas is fixated on his watch, counting down with a trembling voice and Jonathan knows it's for a good reason but he can't remember in the madness. Eleven is stood in the hallway watching, eyes wide and frozen, and Jonathan doesn't know her very well but that doesn't stop him from wrapping his arms around her and steering her away.

She looks up at him. "What's happening?"

"It's okay" Jonathan says, and he can't blame the heavy judgement in her scowl because he doesn't even sound convincing to himself.

It's okay. It's okay.

Please.

By five in the afternoon, about ten hours after Jane closed the gate, Hopper decides he's had enough of seeing children in hospital beds, pale and laden with tubes and wires.

He wants to sit in because he feels partly responsible somehow, but Steve's parents are in the room instead looking distraught, and Hopper has his own places to be and children to care for. Jane is at the Wheelers with Mike, Joyce and Jonathan are in another room somewhere with Will whom the doctors are treating for a burn and some dehydration, and Hopper really has to get back to his girl.

His girl. His Jane.

The thought gives him a warm feeling.

But it's bitter sweet, because he's standing here celebrating gaining a child all while watching two parents potentially lose theirs. He knew what it felt like to see your child pale and dying. To have doctors tell you horrific medical terms you didn't fully understand and inform you the bleak chances of survival. Between his ex-wife, Joyce and Mrs. Harrington, Hopper now knows all too well the earth shattering howl of a grieving mother.

My baby. My baby boy. Someone hurt my baby. Someone hurt my baby boy.

A coma. That little shit put Steve into a goddamn *coma*.

He was no doctor and a lot of what he heard from the Harringtons made as little sense to him as it did them, but 'bleed on the brain' was pretty easy for anyone to get. After Demogordons and demodogs, Mind Flayers and watching Jane close the literal gate to hell, those five words managed to terrify Hopper more than anything else. He couldn't shoot a bleed on the brain. He couldn't punch a coma away. He couldn't burn a fractured skull out of Steve's system with lamps, heaters and a hot poker.

If Hopper thought seeing Will suffering reminded him of Sarah, this violently sent him back even more so. Because this wasn't an otherworldly, evil threat. This was a mundane, Earth-bound horror and there was nothing he, or anyone else but the doctors and Steve's own body, could do to help.

Wait. No.

That was a lie.

Whatever grim outcome this attack led to, whether the kid lived or died, there was something Hopper could do for Steve and he was damn well going to do it. Hopper straightens his back, casting Steve's prone body one last long look, before turning and marching out of the hospital with a sense of purpose in his stride.

He has witness statements to take and an arrest to make.

2. Chapter 2

When Jonathan and Nancy visit Steve, they almost back out three times on the way up.

Everyone except them had visited in the days since the world nearly fell a part. Dustin's mother took him to see Steve every day after school, and each time Joyce took the boys and Max she asked Jonathan if he wanted to come too. He'd always said no.

Even the girl, Eleven or Jane, Jonathan's not sure which one it is now, had apparently visited Steve a few times. Not physically, but instead with a TV on static and a blind fold over her eyes.

And finally it was their turn.

The sad thing is this visit was prompted by when Mike, in all his hot headed teenage wonder, had accused them of not caring about Steve. It upset Jonathan, but his feelings about the accusation had nothing on Nancy, who turned brittle white and ready to shatter into pieces. They both knew Mike didn't mean it. Mike was a kid who'd seen too many friends hurt and was far too ready to fight at the first implication that others didn't love his friends as fiercely as he did.

If it hadn't hurt so much Jonathan would have admired the kid and thought about how welled up Steve would have gotten had he heard the passion in Mike's voice. How much such a jaded kid cared for him now compared to a year before.

"You dated him for a year but you haven't even thought about him? He could die, guys. He could die and neither of you care! You're too sucked up with each other"

They did care. They cared so much that Jonathan is hit was such an unexpected wave of emotion when he walks into Steve's room. It slams into him then, seeing Steve so small on the bed, that he last time he saw the guy he was being carefully bundled into Hopper's truck and sped away into the night, no one willing to wait for an ambulance.

Nancy moves lightning fast to rest her hand on Steve's, but Jonathan lingers by the door.

Why hadn't they come sooner?

Too afraid.

The first thing that strikes Jonathan is how young Steve looks. He's taller and older than both Nancy and Jonathan, but right now Steve looks tiny in his hospital bed with a tube disappearing down his mouth and more bandages than skin showing. His face is relaxed, like he's sleeping, but heavily bruised from the number Billy did on him.

Broken fingers on the right hand.

Broken nose.

Severely bruised cheeks and nose.

Swollen eye socket.

Fractured skull on the left temple.

A bleed on his brain.

Medically induced coma.

He doesn't look dissimilar to Will in the pale hospital gown and anemic lighting, except for his face is mottled with injuries on waxed skin while Will was a porcelain doll.

"Hey Steve" Nancy whispers, and it startles Jonathan from his trance.

She strokes her thumb over the back of his hand and smiles at him like he's awake, looking far more relaxed than Jonathan expected her to: especially thinking back to how anxious she had been in his car moments before. Teary eyed and ghostly pale. Her once trembling hands are now steady.

"My dad asked after you, can you believe it? Mom wanted me to bring you something, so you could have something to see when you wake up, but I told her-" Nancy stalls, glancing to Jonathan for a brief moment of encouragement. He sinks into the chair beside the bed, his hand reaching out to take Nancy's free one. "Looks like Dustin and the kids all got there first. I knew they would. I won't tell you all the toys because it'll be a surprise for you when you see them"

When you see them.

Not *if* you see them. Never if.

"Also, I don't actually know any of them" Nancy frowns and smiles, looking at all the trinkets and figurines left behind by Dustin's trips, and Jonathan finds himself grinning. "Jonathan's here. Maybe he knows?"

Jonathan lifts his spare hand in surrender, flowing with the moment as if this were just a regular conversation with his two friends. As if

Steve were responding.

"Hey don't look at me. There's a lot of D&D in here. Oh, wait, this one-" Jonathan lets go of Nancy to reach for the bedside table, and on it is a caped figurine dramatically wielding dual swords that he recognizes from Will's collection. "This one's a Rogue"

Pretty blue eyes look to him, and Nancy asks him to explain what a Rogue is. So he does.

He recalls as best he can what the Rogue was, their role in the game, and manages to forget for a moment that Steve isn't interrupting him to make a quip about being a nerd, or some other taste of wit the Jonathan of 1983 would have never believed Steve was capable of. He links fingers with Nancy, and the pair talk, and talk, until the nurse comes in to tell them visitor hours are over.

Then he holds Nancy as she hysterically sobs in parking lot, having not even made it to the safety of the car before all the trauma and emotions ringing her dry over the last year overwhelm her in one, horrible sweep.

Not him too. Please, please not him too. Not *another* one.

None of the kids bar Max were around to see it, hell Hopper even wishes he wasn't around to see it. The unpleasant affair is over within ten minutes, but the strain it puts on his brain makes the arrest feel like it takes hours.

After statements are made from the kids, Hopper gathers up his team and sets out to arrest Billy Hargove under the charge of assault. And perhaps murder or manslaughter, an unhelpful voice intones in the back of Hopper's mind as he reels off the young man's rights.

Given he's now over eighteen, Billy is charged as an adult, but that doesn't stop his father from shrieking in Hopper's face and demanding to know the charges, and then once told trying to order the police to hold up while he calls his lawyer.

As Billy's led out into the street, continually trying to shrug off the officers directing him, Hopper casts a look Max's way and can't quite mask the small twitch of his lips when he sees a righteous fire in her eyes. She watches from the front porch and looks at Billy being manhandled into the vehicle like she's only ever dreamed of such a sight; her sleeves are rolled up to show the finger bruises around her wrists and Hopper has a notepad full of accounts of her step-brother grabbing her hard enough to leave such marks. Billy wasn't just being charged for actions against Steve and Lucas, but also long term actions against Max. It sickens Hopper that her mother and step-father hadn't intervened, or perhaps even noticed Billy's abuse. He hopes for her sake that things will change. That little girl deserved better than to live with so much indifference.

Interestingly though, Max's mother looks horrified. Hopper decides not to dwell on that nor ponder on who she's horrified for.

"You'll regret this, Chief Hopper. My son has done nothing wrong" Interesting statement to make, Hopper thinks as Mr. Hargrove sprays spittle in his face, given that the very same man was heard by neighbors calling his son a worthless wreck who did nothing right just the night before. Maybe if this waste of space had been a better father, Steve wouldn't be on death's door and Max would feel safe in her own home.

With the same blank tone he applied to everything outside of Joyce and Jane, Hopper hums at the man. "Uh huh. Yeah okay, take it up with complaints and get this lawyer of yours here soon. Make sure he turns right at the second lights, not the first- Wouldn't want him getting lost"

He shuts the door in Mr. Hargrove's face and drives off with the man yelling through the window. He turns left instead of right to his home at the relevant split road: changing course on impulse.

"You've arrested the man who did this?" Hopper hears Mrs. Harrington intone.

He starts, having not realised she'd noticed him there, and clears his throat. "Ugh. Yeah. Just this morning, Mrs. Harri-"

Before he can say anymore as he takes her acknowledgement as permission to enter Steve's hospital room, the woman with lovely brown hair and Hollywood red lipstick on carries on. "Good. I'm glad. I hope he goes down for a long time... I'm so- I'm so glad you're here, chief. That you're all here when we're not"

She's dressed to the nines, the only state he's ever seen her in, and against the ghost of a child on the bed and the stale colors around them, she looks so out of place. Mrs. Harrington, and her high flying husband, were always far too glamorous seeming for a small place like Hawkins. Hopper faintly remembers how they were the talk of the town when they first moved there, just over eighteen years ago with a fancy car and buying the most pricey house on the street.

People treated them like rare creatures, these stunning people and a few people thought the Mrs. had to be some big screen belle looking for a quiet life. Others believed her to be a billionaire businessman's lovely trophy wife.

Despite all this and how maintained her clothes and make up were, Hopper can see a hollowness in her that he knows too well. She might be postcard ready on the outside, but on the inside she's a wreck.

"We're never here. Fredrick and I travel so much you see, and Steve had his schooling to think about so we could never bring him with us. He's a good boy, a strong boy, always looked out for himself" She smiles, but while her teeth are pearls the tilt of her lips is more of a sob. "He wasn't planned. I remember telling Fredrick and he got so mad he broke a glass"

For lack of anything better to do, Hopper stood awkwardly behind her, unsure of what to do with this down pour of exposition. All of this would be a gold mine for the ladies in the hairdressers or the people down the bar, but for some reason after eighteen years she was telling the Harrington mystery to the one guy who didn't give a shit.

"Course he was mad. He had a vasectomy when he was in his twenties" Mrs. Harrington laughs like admitting false paternity is a hilarious joke, and its haunting. "Who wouldn't be mad that their wife had been banging some man on the side? He stormed out and didn't come back until a week later, telling me he'd got us a sweet place in this lovely little town in Indiana. It'd be perfect for the baby, he said"

Again. Information Hopper has no idea what to do with other than stand in screaming silence. He fixes his eyes on Steve, breathing through a tube, and wonders if he can hear them.

"I didn't want to, I loved my home and being close to family, but gosh wasn't Fredrick so insistent" There's a long, long pause and it's a long enough silence that Hopper has enough time to regret every decision he made that day: ending with choosing to visit the kid instead of just head straight home.

He's about to slip away when Mrs. Harrington- Leslie, her name is Leslie. It felt wrong to refer to her so formally after that gush of personal information- shifts in her seat and looks him dead in the

eye. She pins him and he can see her sharp mind whirring through something so fast, coming to a decision and he can see the shift in her. She goes from a delightful, commercial to someone far more hardened and wary before his very eyes.

"What do you think it is myself and my husband do? For work. What do you think our jobs are that we can afford long vacations across the world and pay for a nice house and a nanny?" She seems angry and she doesn't wait for him to answer. "We're unemployed. Retired. Both of us. We say we're old money, that Fredrick's a hot shot business man and I'm a stunning catwalk model. Which is partly true, I do do some modelling occasionally, but really all Fredrick does is go play golf, that kinda stuff. We don't work. Haven't in eighteen years"

Soft manicured hands reach for her designer satchel and open it up. Inside is a mammoth stack of files she can barely wrap her thin hand around. It's so heavy Mrs. Harrington doesn't lift it, she instead slides it out of the bag and right onto the bed. Patting the brown cover with an odd finality.

"That lab that got blown open?" Hopper nods, terrified of where this line of questioning is going. "These are my copies of reports made by the nannies they gave us for Steven, and those vacations were all pre-paid excursions to get us out of the house when they wanted us out of it"

Mrs. Harrington is a thunder storm. A rolling, coiling ball of rage and ferocity all wrapped up in a Vogue shell. She has the same fire Joyce has, but in a controlled mask that never once slips up: she's not manic in her passion like Joyce is, she's firm, cool. She takes a moment to stroke her baby's hair, kiss his forehead and leave a faint red print there, and then gathers up her belongings.

On her way out she blows the stunned chief a kiss, tears making her eyes shine like they're illuminated by a soft box.

"Have a nice day, Chief Hopper"

She left the files on the bed and it takes him a good few minutes of confused pacing to take a look at them.

On the label of every single one of them is two lines of type that makes his stomach drop.

"Fuck. Shit. Fuck. No. Fuck" Jim hisses as he skims over each cover, and eventually drops the files down as if they burned him. He darts around, foot swinging out to kick the wall and hands rising to cover his face, and then rake through his hair. "No. Fuck, no"

Behind him, blissfully unaware, Steve sleeps on to the quiet bleeps of machines and the wheeze of his ventilator.

Notes for the Chapter:

So I know a few people were looking forward to reading about Billy's arrest and might have hoped for something longer, but this story is more about the other characters, how they feel, and how they're coping with what's happened rather than fixating too heavily on the abuser and attacker that is Billy (and his equal waste of space father). I don't want to give his character more focus than I think he's worth in this situation. He gets what's coming to him, off he goes, now back to the main people and how they're handling things.

Sorry if this wasn't what people were expecting with how I wrote Billy's arrest.

As for what Steve's mother gave Hopper, you'll have to wait and see! This story might well get a spin off, as it's already drifted into something bigger than I expected it to be and loads more ideas have come

flooding in. People have shown so much interest in it and I've been grinning like mad reading all your comments x x Let me know if you'd be interested in a series based off of what Hopper is going to discover in those files and I'll see what time I can find in between university work.

FYI writing Steve's mother was an otherworldly experience jfc. She's turned out so ethereal and more like a Hollywood golden age actress than how I first envisioned her in the first chapter. She literally came to life without my say so... damn.

3. Chapter 3

After an eight day coma and critical surgeries, the doctors carefully remove the ventilator tube from his esophagus, and replace it with a non-invasive mask. They tell the Harringtons that they're going to ease Steven awake by steadily dropping the dosages keeping him under.

A doctor tells them it will be a while before they fully get their boy back. A statement they'd all look back on and realize she didn't just mean him waking up, but a whole, *whole* lot longer after that. Not hours. Not days. Not even weeks. Months, or possibly years. A while was one helluva vague time frame.

He doesn't wake up in the traditional sense. Steven Daniel Harrington floats around in a state between sleep and awake. His body is switched on but his brain is taking the long route. For three days he breathes deeply, blinks slowly, gazes lazily around the room, and even manages to swallow some water, but never speaks and never gives any indication he knows his mother holds him close or that Dustin crawls up onto the bed to read to him.

He mostly sleeps, and Hopper couldn't help but find that morbidly ironic.

Dustin reports back to the rest of the party not to go see Steve just yet, he's not really awake yet.

Not really.

Some time during those few days, Jim catches Jane with a blind fold in her lap, the TV playing static to herself, with her chest heaving and her fine brow furrowed in confusion, and sighs.

Explaining the lengthy 'wake up' process of a coma to a girl who had only just wrapped her head around the concept of a coma was difficult, especially when Hopper barely understood it himself. He'd always thought people just woke up- *ping! Tap that alarm clock, it's time for work-* so it shocked him when he marched into the kid's room with a balloon, one card signed by everyone at the station and another by Jane, and an awkward speech planned out to commend Steve's bravery, and found himself met with a half-awake boy who barely lifted his gaze let alone his head to acknowledge Hopper's arrival.

Head injuries were tricky. Brains are still a wildly unknown territory. The doctor had sighed. We can do all the surgeries in the world but still have no solid idea of what happens after they open their eyes again.

Jim Hopper has only ever cried over three things in his adult life. Sara. His wife. And Jane.

Seeing Jane wrinkle her nose and whisper the confused words. "So Steve is... Gone, not Gone... Like momma?" after his abysmal explanation makes that four.

Eventually on day four after he first came off the drugs, when the nurse draws the curtains Steve reacts to the light change and shields his eyes. By the time they're drawn back closed his room had become a flurry of activity. Day five through to seven it's a whirl wind. Doctors, experts, relatives, loved ones, they all flooded in whenever space could be made for them between Steve's naps.

He still doesn't speak and everyone is encouraged to try and prompt him to.

Dustin asks him what the food is like, and Steve smiles sweetly at

him.

Nancy fills him in on what he missed in class, and Steve touches her hair.

Hopper makes a million excuses not to go, and instead buries himself in work, caring for Jane and combing through the little gift Mrs. Leslie Harrington left him. Anything but visit. He can't. Not after the last time he naively walked in there expecting the kid to have magically bounced back. He can't take that whiplash reminder of Sara again.

On day eight, Joyce brings Will and the other kids for an after school visit, and Steve watches them play a miniature game of D&D on his bed silently.

So silently.

His eyes are bright, and Joyce can sense the intelligence and alertness there as he studies every move the board pieces make, but he never says a single word. Which is why she feels a strange chill down her spine when those same sharp eyes drift away from the gathering of children huddled around him, and fix on thin air to his left. It's not a listless, empty gaze like those early few days after the drugs wore off: there's too much purpose. He's looking at something.

She knows because she had seen it such a gaze so many times on Will. The only thing missing is the terror. Will had been paralyzed with fear, but Steve almost seems playful in the way his eyes wrinkle at the corners and his lips twitch in the faint smile he'd graced all of them with lately. It simultaneously puts Joyce at ease, while also slipping ice down her back and pooling uncomfortably in her gut.

Whatever it is must disappear, because Steve's eyelashes flutter in an

expression close to surprise and he turns his quiet attention back to the game. That smile still on his lips and a bandage dominating the left side of his face.

Joyce wraps her jacket tighter around her body, fighting off how spooked she feels, and reminds the kids that they have fifteen more minutes before it's time to go.

It's three o'clock in the goddamn morning on day twenty-two when Hopper wakes up slumped over the files Mrs. Harrington gave him to the sound of the phone ringing. It's a competition between him and the phone on which makes more noise as he rushes to answer it, peeking warily at Jane's door- all too aware of her light sleeping habits.

He stops himself from grinding out his usual insults and complaints, because in the last year and a half Jim Hopper has learned that out of hours calls are to no longer be growled at.

"Jim?" Mrs. Harrington's dulcet voice greets him, wobbling, and his stomach drops.

Oh god no. The kid's dead. He passed away in the night. Complication with the surgery. Had another seizure. A stroke even. Doctors couldn't resuscitate him. A long, harrowing bleep of a flat line pierced a room full of devastated faces...

Those are the conclusions his brain jumps to from the swell of emotion in such a composed woman's voice and he's not proud of it either. Not of the way he pinches the bridge of his nose to press back the burn in his eyes, nor of the way his hand shakes as he does so.

"Leslie..." He whispers. What the hell can he say? He knows how she

feels but that doesn't make it any easier to summon up the words-

"He spoke!" Leslie gushes, and Hopper's eyes snap open. At the same time, Jane's door creaks open to reveal her sleepy, curious face. "My baby boy spoke, Chief. He said your name. He's done nothing but ask for you this last hour"

Jim glances over to the files on his desk. He's too far away to hide them from Jane, there's no subtle way to disguise their existence from the smart girl who's already padding over to her daddy's desk with a look too intense for someone who'd just woken up. He tracks her movements, holds his breath when she reads the labels, and freezes at the distinct absence of surprise on his girl's face.

Hopper can barely believe his ears. "Really? Kid doesn't speak for almost a month and the first thing he does is ask for me?"

"Uh, huh, yes. He keeps asking for you, almost non-stop, Chief" He can practically hear Leslie frowning down the phone. "And also Jane. We don't know any Janes, the doctor thinks that could be some random name and Steve's a bit confused"

A pause.

"Jane?" Hopper asks, clarifying because there's no way on this goddamn green Earth Steve would know that name. Well, at least not in this context. Eleven had been a need to know topic exclusive only to those who'd known her for that short time over a year ago, and no one got the chance to explain her to Steve after her return.

So there was no goddamn way-

Leslie hums again. "Oh yes. Jane. Hopper. Jane. Hopper. You and

someone called Jane, over and over, for the last hour at least. Could you come down? I know it's late, oh no, early! Early. But could you? We can't get him to say anything else and they think seeing you might spur something new"

Jim still has his eyes fixed on Jane and tells Mrs. Harrington that he'd be there in twenty. He hangs up.

His girl gives him a sheepish look.

Like he'd just caught her sneaking Eggos instead of finishing her dinner.

Goddamnit.

"Are we going to go see Three now?" Jane asks him, false innocent, and has the audacity to look shocked when Hopper thumps his forehead against the wall by the phone. His eyes closed. His mind buzzing out a self composing count down.

He has to take a minute.

Or two.

Or fucking **Three**.

Notes for the Chapter:

SO!! Steve lives, comas aren't like waking up from a nice nap, and dun-dun-dun, he's one of the lab experiments.

He's not precisely the same as Eleven/Jane and Eight/Kali, but similar and well done to everyone who guessed it.

I KNOW I KNOW. IT'S SUPER SHORT. This story was always meant to have a short, almost dream like tone to it, and I wanted to keep with that theme, for the #Aesthetic, but the next story in line will be longer and have a more grounded tone I promise.

This WILL be a series now, because there's more to go into and I've been so overwhelmed by the love the plot twist got that I can't resist. A few people guessed part of it immediately, but interestingly no one has grabbed the whole picture just yet, which is good and I'm relieved xD there are some nice theories though, and I've enjoyed reading everyone's comments. One person's theory was a great one, really close, but still not quite hitting the nail. I cannot tell you how emotional I am that people have enjoyed this story enough to even HAVE THEORIES?!? MY MIND IS BLOWN I LOVE YOU.

Ah Eleven, sweet little Eleven, she has a lot of explaining to do to Hopper let me tell you, oh ho ho hooo.

I'll do my best to keep to regular updates as I pan out the next installment, currently only about half the plan is plotted out, but I hope to get the next story posted before the end of the month.

Lastly, I LOVE LOVE LOVE all of you so much, and remember: if you or anyone else ever suffers a head injury, of any magnitude, SEEK MEDICAL ATTENTION. Stay safe, my loves x

Author's Note:

I'm not entirely happy with this, I've rewritten it a few times and this is the final version. It's not perfect, but I hope it gets the point across :3

So is Steve going to die? You'll have to wait and see my dudes. (Unless you follow my tumblr... in which

case HA you still know nothing, JAHn Snoeee)

If you or someone else ever suffers ANY head injury, especially if it's one that causes any of these symptoms: bleeding, unconsciousness, dizziness, changes in personality, bleeding from the nose or ears, ringing in the ears or nausea SEEK IMMEDIATE MEDICAL ATTENTION. NEVER IGNORE A HEAD INJURY.